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EDITORIALS

The unflappable Mr. Leggett

Montgomery County's steady leader skillfully navigates lean times.

ISIAH LEGGETT, Montgomery County's top elected official, represents about one in six Marylanders — more constituents than any executive in the state save the governor. Cool-headed, politically nimble, widely liked and resolutely nonconfrontational, Mr. Leggett has compiled a record of generally shrewd judgments over the past four, difficult years in his capacity as Montgomery County executive. That's a good thing for the county and its nearly 1 million residents, because there's every likelihood Mr. Leggett will win reelection this fall; so far no credible opponent has emerged.

Few believe Mr. Leggett has any grand strategic agenda for the county, let alone, just shy of his 66th birthday, political ambition beyond the office he holds. Rather, his success owes everything to an emollient political style — by turns soothing, soporific and cerebral — and a knack for dealmaking. It's a measure of Mr. Leggett's agility that his opposition is so muted and that no prominent rival is willing to challenge him head-on. That's all the more remarkable in a season of austerity, as he has raised taxes, angering businesses, and made drastic budget cuts, provoking the county's powerful public employee unions.

On taking office in 2007, he inherited a bloated budget and unions with a grandiose sense of entitlement. Since then, in his steady way, Mr. Leggett has whittled away at both while managing a querulous County Council. As the recession sapped revenue, he has been forced to close almost \$2.3 billion in budget gaps, including nearly \$1 billion this year alone. In the process, he's frozen salaries for police, firefighters and other public employees; eliminated 1,100 jobs, about 10 percent of the county's nonschool workforce; and

sharply increased taxes on energy and cell-phones. He's also had to pare funding for affordable housing, an issue he has championed for years.

Possibly, a different county executive might have done things faster, set clearer priorities, knocked heads and provided more forceful leadership; before freezing salaries, after all, Mr. Leggett did negotiate unsustainable raises for county workers. But others, lacking his cool temperament, might also have injected more stress into a system that hardly needed it. Consistently, Mr. Leggett has ratcheted down the volume, managing by dint of tactical acuity and temporizing, and making a virtue of half-measures and compromise.

A case in point is his dealings with the county unions, which have fused appeasement with hard-nosed bargaining. Other area suburban jurisdictions froze salaries last year, but Mr. Leggett allowed most employees in Montgomery to continue receiving their annual raises, known as steps, among other concessions, in return for forfeiting cost-of-living increases (COLAs). That showed Mr. Leggett's soft side. Yet when the firefighters refused to give up their COLAs, Mr. Leggett withheld them anyway, a decision affirmed by an independent arbitrator who ruled that a budget crunch trumped labor contracts. That showed Mr. Leggett's steel.

Characteristically, Mr. Leggett then declined to turn his victory into a rout, agreeing with the firefighters to formally vacate the arbitrator's decision so it would not apply to future labor disputes. That move restored some goodwill — of which Mr. Leggett appears to retain a lot around the county.